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STAGE GUILD PLAYS
DUST OF THE ROAD



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A PLAY IN ONE ACT

BY

KENNETH SAWYER GOODMAN



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THE STAGE GUILD
CHICAGO

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DUST OF THE ROAD

A Play in One Act

CHARACTERS:

Peter Steele.

Prudence Steele, his wife.

An Old Man, Prudence's uncle.

A Tramp.

The time is about one o'clock of a Christmas morning in the early seventies. The place is the living room of a comfortable and fairly prosperous Middle Western farmer. At the right as you face the stage is a fireplace with a glowing fire in it. Beside the fire is a large armchair in which Prudence is sitting. At her elbow is a small table with a lighted lamp, having an opaque shade of green tin. At the left is a door giving into other parts of the house; at the back centre a door giving outside. There is a larger table at left centre near the front of the stage. There is also a lighted lamp on this table, but the back of the stage is in semi-darkness. Near the outside door is a window, the curtains of which are drawn. As the curtain rises, the Old Man has just shut and bolted the outside door as if shutting some one out. He is only partly dressed and carries a lighted candle in his hand.

PRUDENCE. Well, what did he say?

OLD MAN. Nothing. He's gone, if that's any comfort to you.

PRUDENCE. It is a comfort to me. I don't like folks coming to the door at this time of night.

OLD MAN. You might have stirred yourself to take a look at him. He was that cold I could hear his teeth clatter.

PRUDENCE. What was he like?

OLD MAN. Youngish, I'd say, with thin cheeks and a yellow beard. But I never seen such old looking eyes as he had.

PRUDENCE. Go to bed, uncle.

OLD MAN. Both his hands was bandaged. I could see the blood on 'em.

PRUDENCE. Well, what of it? We can't be feeding every beggar that comes to the house.

OLD MAN. [*At the window.*] He ain't turned the willows at the bend of the road. I could holler to him yet.

PRUDENCE. Go back to bed, I tell you, and let me read my Bible till Peter comes in.

OLD MAN. [*Going toward the inside door.*] You've set me thinking, Prudence Steele. You've set me thinking again.

PRUDENCE. Hush your mouth, and go to bed.

OLD MAN. Aye, aye, that's it! 'To them that hath shall be given, and from him that hath not shall be taken away even that which he hath.' If folks only knows enough to keep their mouths shut.

PRUDENCE. Now, you're blaspheming again.

OLD MAN. Maybe I be. But if I was to open my mouth now and tell what I can remember clear as day, wouldn't I be serving the Lord? Answer me that.

PRUDENCE. Nobody 'd believe you.

OLD MAN. I ain't asking 'em to. If you and Peter can disremember what happened in this room, it ain't for me to turn against my own kin.

PRUDENCE. Nothing happened in this room.

OLD MAN. Maybe I never seen thirty one-hundred dollar bills counted out on this table.

PRUDENCE. Go to bed.

OLD MAN. I'm going—I'm going, but it would do me good to see them that's proud pulled down and her that would n't spare a crust for a lame beggar on Christmas Eve, losing a piece of money like that as a judgment. It would be as fine a judgment as ever I see in that there book of yours.

[The old man goes out chuckling. Prudence follows him to the door, closes it, listens a moment, then blows out the lamp on the larger table and returns to the chair by the fire. She turns the pages of the book and then lays it face down on her knee and puts her hand over her eyes. The whole stage is now nearly dark, the only light coming from the lamp on the small table and from the fire in the grate. The Tramp opens the outside door and steps into the room. Prudence stirs a little and the book drops from her lap, rousing her. She sits up and listens. The Tramp closes the door and shoots the bolt.]

PRUDENCE. You're powerful late getting in.

TRAMP. Aye, maybe I am. *[He rattles the door to see if it is fast.]*

PRUDENCE. Hush your noise with the bolt, can't you! You'll be having Uncle down here again.

TRAMP. I'll take my chance of that!

PRUDENCE. What's the matter with your voice?

TRAMP. It's the river fog sticking in my throat.

PRUDENCE. *[Rising.]* Come here and let me look at you. I never heard you speak with that voice before.

TRAMP [*Stepping into the light.*] I dare say you never did!

PRUDENCE. God save us! I thought you were my husband!

TRAMP. I gathered as much from your friendly greeting.
[*He comes a step nearer.*]

PRUDENCE. Stand off or I'll scream! What do you want? Who are you?

TRAMP. What's the need of your knowing?

PRUDENCE. Tell me what you want and get out of my house. You need n't grin at me. I'm not afraid of you!

TRAMP. You 're a bold woman!

PRUDENCE. I have cause to be, with a husband leaving me lonesome half the nights of the year, and beggars prowling the dark like rats.

TRAMP. You've a brave tongue in your head, and a kind voice, like a chilly wind on a tin church steeple. You'll ask me to sit by your fire next and offer me a sup of something hot.

PRUDENCE. I'll point you the door you came in by, and set the dog to your coat-tails.

TRAMP. Fine hospitality for the beginning of Christmas Day.

PRUDENCE. Who are you?

TRAMP. Dust of the road, my dear, like any other man. Dust with a spark of fire in it.

PRUDENCE. You're a tramp, by the looks of you — or worse.

TRAMP. A tramp is it? That's what you'd call a gay fellow tramping the hills for the clean joy of sun and air; keen snow in winter and the voice of the birds in the

warm season. It's what you'd call the lifeless wretches, skulking from doorstep to doorstep for the leavings of other folk's tables. I'm neither the one sort nor the other, but the name fits me well enough.

PRUDENCE. Whatever you call yourself, you've got no business in a decent person's house at the middle of the night.

TRAMP. [*Taking a pipe from his pocket and filling it.*] Is your husband like to be home soon?

PRUDENCE. You'll hear him at the door any minute now. If you're thinking of robbery you'd better be quick about it. There's little enough to take.

TRAMP. [*Lighting his pipe and seating himself on the edge of the larger table.*] You can keep your hand off that trinket at your neck and make your mind easy about the spoons. I'm a disreputable character, a prowler in the night, a betrayer of friendship; I've none of what you'd call common decency; I'd as leave eat your bread and kiss your hand and do you a dirty turn afterward as not, but — well — I've a different whim. I'm not here to make you trouble.

PRUDENCE. Fine ideas you've got! What'll my husband say when he smells the smoke of your pipe?

TRAMP. You'll have no call to lie, my dear, though you've a quick enough wit! I'm waiting to see him myself when he comes in.

PRUDENCE. Like as not he'll break your head for your pains.

TRAMP. Aye, like as not.

PRUDENCE. You've got gall to be sitting there swinging your feet.

TRAMP. I'm thinking what I'll say to you in the meantime.

PRUDENCE. You won't be doing much thinking when he's pounded you till the teeth ache in your jaws,

TRAMP. [*In a cold sharp voice and speaking very slowly.*] Why did you send that other beggar away just now, Prudence Steele?

PRUDENCE. So you know my name, do you?

TRAMP. Yes! It's a cruel sounding name, Prudence Steele, and you've a cruel way of speaking and of looking at a poor man, my dear!

PRUDENCE. You're a fine hand at a compliment, Mister Tramp.

TRAMP. Why did you send him away?

PRUDENCE. Send who away?

TRAMP. The lame man with the bandages on his hands and feet.

PRUDENCE. What's that to you?

TRAMP. I was standing in the road. I saw him knock at your door. I saw it open a little. I saw it close again. I saw him go away—just as I've seen him go from thousands of other doors.

PRUDENCE. He must be a friend of yours.

TRAMP. No. He was one once. Now he's a creditor.

PRUDENCE. By the looks of it, he'll have a hard time getting his money.

TRAMP. Money's easy to find,—sometimes too easy. Now if you'd care to feel in my pockets — [*He jingles coins in his pockets.*]

PRUDENCE. Well, pay him then, and keep him from pestering other folks.

TRAMP. One isn't always minded to pay one's debts. And sometimes it's not so easy as you'd think. Only one day of the year I walk the same road with him. I follow him with the money in my hand. I met him at your gate

just now and offered it. He turned aside his face. Would you like to see the coins? [*Holding out his hand with coins.*] You must. Thirty pieces of silver coined in the Roman mint at Jerusalem.

[*Faint blue light now illumines the face of the Tramp and becomes brighter as the scene goes on.*]

PRUDENCE. [*Fascinated, looking at the money.*] You frighten me. What are those stains?

TRAMP. Blood, my dear! It's blood money.

PRUDENCE. Whose blood?

TRAMP. The man's who knocked at your door.

PRUDENCE. What did he want?

TRAMP. He came to give — not to ask.

PRUDENCE. What beggar would be going about the country giving something away?

TRAMP. Yes, Prudence Steele, what beggar would be doing that? It's a riddle for you to read.

PRUDENCE. And I suppose now, you've got something to give me!

TRAMP. Yes, something you won't be likely to take.

PRUDENCE. Huh! Advice, I suppose. That's the cheapest thing I know.

TRAMP. Sit down. [*Prudence sits down.*] Where the man with the wounded hands knocks once, he knocks again. Wherever he's turned away, I find the door unlatched. But open the door to him, and I stand in the road outside, — I'm glad! Oh, I'm a person of strange contradictions — like any other man. You don't understand me.

PRUDENCE. No.

TRAMP. No matter! When he knocks again, let him come in.

PRUDENCE. What do you mean?

TRAMP. Let him come in, I tell you, and save the joy of life in your heart.

[There is a stamping outside and the door is shaken.]

PETER. *[Outside.]* Hi! Open the door! Prudence, I say! Wake up and open the door!

PRUDENCE. *[Starting and passing her hands across her eyes.]*
It's Peter. It's my husband.

TRAMP. Open the door for him!

[Prudence runs to the door and opens it. Peter enters and she clings to him, half hysterical. The Tramp remains seated on the larger table, but the light fades from his face.]

PRUDENCE. Peter — oh, Peter, Peter!

PETER. What's biting you? Let go my arm, woman! Are you trying to claw the coat off me?

PRUDENCE. Send him away! Send him away! Send him away!

PETER. Take your hands off me.

PRUDENCE. Send him away!

PETER. Send who away?

PRUDENCE. That man! That man over there! I'm afraid of him!

PETER. What man?

PRUDENCE. He came in without knocking. I thought it was you! He's terrible — he's crazy! Look at his eyes! Send him away!

PETER. Go on! Don't be a fool! There's nobody here!

PRUDENCE. Over there! He was standing by the table. The table over there. . . . He's gone!

[They both move across the room, but the Tramp has disappeared in the darkness.]

PETER. You've been asleep! You've had a nightmare. You've been worrying again. You'd no call to sit up waiting for me. There's been nobody here.

PRUDENCE. I could have taken my solemn oath! . . .

PETER. *[Roughly.]* You'll take no oaths except them I tell you to. Go to bed!

PRUDENCE. Where've you been?

PETER. Up to the church. I stayed to a vestry meeting. I walked home slow.

PRUDENCE. You've decided what we're going to do?

PETER. Go to bed and let me think. I'll tell you in the morning.

[Prudence moves toward the inside door. Peter calls her back.]

PETER. Look here! You'll keep your mouth shut? You'll stick to that?

PRUDENCE. Yes. *[She makes a move as if she were coming back to say something.]*

PETER. Get out of here and let me alone. *[He sits down in the chair by the fire and puts his face in his hands. Prudence goes out. The Tramp reappears.]*

TRAMP. Well, Peter Steele, is it easy to think of perjury and theft on Christmas morning?

PETER. God! Who's talking to me!

TRAMP. A greater rogue than yourself.

PETER. [*Rising.*! I see you now, confound you! Where were you hiding when I came in?

TRAMP. No matter!

PETER. So, my wife was n't dreaming, eh!

TRAMP. No more than you are.

PETER. You frightened her, eh! I'll make short work of you. [*He begins rolling up his sleeves.*]

TRAMP. I only gave her a little advice.

PETER. Damn you! I'll give you something else! [*He moves toward the tramp.*]

TRAMP. [*Coolly.*] Sit down!

PETER. Get out of here, with your advice! Get out, I tell you, before I kick you out.

TRAMP. [*More harshly but without moving.*] Sit down.

PETER. You can't frighten me with your talk. I'm an honest man, I tell you.

TRAMP. So was I once.

PETER. What have you got to do with me, damn you?

TRAMP. 'For there is nothing covered that shall not be revealed, neither hid that shall not be known.'

PETER. [*With a sigh of relief.*] Oh, I see now. You're only a traveling preacher.

TRAMP. No, but I've travelled much and worn the cloth in my time.

PETER. I'm dashed if I see what you're driving at!

TRAMP. You will presently.

PETER. I won't listen to you.

TRAMP. You know what's coming.

PETER. How should I know what's coming? I'll — I'll —

TRAMP. You'll listen, Peter Steele, because I'm going to tell you something about yourself and you'll know it for the truth.

PETER. If—if some one sent you here to pump me, you'd better be off, or I'll have the law on you both.

TRAMP. You had a friend, Peter Steele, and you loved him. He'd often left his affairs in your hands. You'd served him honestly and he trusted you.

PETER. And why wouldn't anybody trust me? I've been an honest man, I tell you.

TRAMP. He came to you in this room. It was the spring the war began. He had enlisted a company. Before he left he brought you money, money to keep for his boy.

PETER. It's a lie! I tell you, it's a damned lie! What right's the boy got to think his father gave me money to keep for him? He ain't got a receipt, has he? It ain't shown in the accounts, is it?

TRAMP. No, Peter Steele, the boy can't show a receipt and the entry's not to be found in the accounts.

PETER. By what token do you think a man would be fool enough to leave money lying around loose like that?

TRAMP. By the token that he trusted you.

PETER. I never had it! I tell you I never had it! What do you know about it?

TRAMP. The drums were beating in the road. Your friend was in his captain's uniform. His sword lay on the table by the door; his cloak over the back of that chair. You sat here. He stood across the table from you. Your wife sat where you're sitting now; her uncle over there by the window.

PETER. Who told you all that? What tricks are you trying to play on me?

TRAMP. Your friend laid the money on this table : thirty one-hundred dollar bills. He said to you, "Peter, I want to leave this money with you. In case I don't come back, I'd rather my boy did n't count on anything at all when he makes his start. I've fixed things safe for him till he can earn his keep. This is something extra, a nest egg for him, when he's twenty-one." Then he shook you by the hand. As he went down the path, the drums stopped beating, and when the room was still again you heard the voice of the money!

PETER. God, how did you know that?

TRAMP. Oh, you meant to keep faith, Peter Steele, but you never entered the three thousand dollars in your accounts. Well, he never came back. You read his name in the lists. It set you thinking about the boy and the money. Years went by. The boy began to work and earn his keep. You watched him grow up and wondered if he guessed. Last week, you remembered that your debt fell due on the day after Christmas. Then you sat down to figure interest. You'd used the money well and you tried a just rate. The total startled you. Then you tried three per cent ; still too much! Then you sat quiet and the money whispered to you, "Why give me up at all? No one can prove you ever had me."

PETER. And they can't prove it! My wife and her uncle can swear they never saw it paid.

TRAMP. Certainly.

PETER. The boy can't show a receipt.

TRAMP. None!

PETER. No. I don't know who told you all this, but if you're trying to blackmail me, there's the door, and be damned!

TRAMP. I'll not trouble you again, whatever decision you come to.

PETER. Then, what in hell did you come here for? Answer me that!

TRAMP. To advise you to give the boy his money of your own free will.

PETER. Ha! Ha! Anything else?

TRAMP. No.

PETER. Who in the devil are you, stranger?

TRAMP. Come closer!

PETER. I can see you well enough from here.

TRAMP. Come here and look at me. Have you ever seen me before?

PETER. No, thank Heaven! I never have.

TRAMP. Look in my eyes.

[Peter moves toward him as if dazed.]

PETER. They're like the eyes of a cat! There's fire in 'em!

TRAMP. Flame from a sunset under Calvary. Look at my throat!

PETER. *[Shrinking away.]* I've seen marks like that on a man. . . .

TRAMP. I hanged myself to a dead tree on a stony hill-side. Listen!

[He jingles the money in his pocket.]

PETER. It's the sound of money!

TRAMP. Thirty pieces of silver, coined in the Roman mint at Jerusalem; the price of my soul, that's walked the evil edges of the world, for nineteen centuries,

PETER. In God's name, tell me who you are !

TRAMP. The one being that knows best the priceless value of the thing you're so ready to sell,—Judas of Kerioth.

[He advances toward Peter, who sinks into the chair by the fire, cowering away from him.]

PETER. Let me alone, I say ! Let me alone !

TRAMP. You'd been an honest man, Peter Steele, and the sun had warmed you and the birds piped to you when you ploughed the fields. You'd looked against the faces of red hills when dawn was new, and strained your eyes across blue valleys at the close of day. And men spoke you fair in the roads and children turned to you as you passed, till a little while ago. What came over you that you'd put the joy of living in pawn for thirty pieces of money ?

PETER. Let me be ! I've become a hard man ; and money's a big thing in the world. What's the piping of birds to me. Leave me alone and let me sell my soul if I like ! It's mine to sell !

TRAMP. Aye ! It's yours to sell. To sell over and over, if you like. There's money to be got for it, more than the first price you take, and pride, and ease of body, and fear of men ! But it is n't only your soul you sell, Peter Steele, and nothing you get will compare with that which goes out of you when the first payment clinks in your hand.

PETER. Let me be ! Let me be !

TRAMP. You'll miss the joy of small things crying in the grass, and the pleasant sadness that comes of watching the fall of yellow leaves. You'll take no comfort in the sound of a woman's singing, or the laughing of a child, or the crackling of a fire in the grate.

PETER. I was never a hand at noticing such things.

TRAMP. No, but an honest man shares all the common gifts of God. He feels and is grateful without knowing how or why. He seldom knows the joy of it all, till he 's lost the power of feeling.

PETER. Let me be.

TRAMP. You 'll walk the sunshiny roads and have only the dust of them in your throat. You 'll see little lakes lying in the bosom of the hills, like purple wine in cups of green jade, and have only the pain of daylight in your eyes. You 'll lie down to sleep with the crystal stars blinking at you, and have only the empty blackness of night in your heart. I know how it will be with you, Peter Steele.

PETER. What do you want me to do?

TRAMP. Give up the money of your own free will.

PETER. What interest have you got in seeing me go straight? Whose work are you doing?

TRAMP. [*Slowly.*] It 's one thing to die in a splendid agony and save the world. It 's another to drag the weight of a name like mine from century to century; to live on and on, and suffer every pain of death; to save a man here and a man there only to balance my own long account — to die — to be forgotten.

PETER. To balance your long account?

TRAMP. Turn you from the thing you 're about to do, and I toss a grain of dust into the scales. There 's a heavy weight to be balanced, Peter Steele, and it 's only one day of the year I 'm free to search.

PETER. Let me be.

TRAMP. Would you rob me, too?

PETER. [*Putting his hands to his head.*] Let me think, I tell you! Let me think!

[The inside door opens, and Prudence enters dressed in a wrapper and carrying a small lamp. As the light illumines that side of the room, the glow fades on the Tramp's face and he disappears. Peter sits with his head in his hands, just as Prudence left him.]

PRUDENCE. Peter, Peter, are you asleep?

PETER. *[Starting.]* Eh? No.

PRUDENCE. Why have n't you come to bed? It's near daylight.

PETER. I've been thinking, Prudence,—I've been thinking.

PRUDENCE. About — about?

PETER. Say it! I've been thinking of perjury and theft on Christmas morning. I've been thinking of selling my soul for thirty pieces of money. *[He rises.]* But, thank God, I have n't sold it yet.

PRUDENCE. *[Going to him.]* Oh, Peter! Peter!

PETER. The boy will get his money on the nail. I'm an honest man, Prue. I'm an honest man, I tell you!

PRUDENCE. Oh, Peter, I'm glad, I'm glad!

PETER. Every penny he'll get and interest. Fair interest!

PRUDENCE. It's a great deal of money, but I'm glad!

PETER. Little enough to give for keeping the joy of living in your heart on Christmas Day.

PRUDENCE. I want to tell you something. I could n't sleep either. Oh, Peter, I could n't sleep.

PETER. You've been thinking of it, too.

PRUDENCE. Not about the money. There was a lame man here just before you came in. I sent him away. It

worries me, Peter. I'm sorry I didn't let him in. Uncle saw him. He 'd been hurt. His feet and hands were bandaged. I thought—I thought perhaps . . . I feel as if he'd stopped somewhere near the house.

PETER. Which way did he go?

PRUDENCE. Toward the willows at the bend of the road.

PETER. [*Reaching for his hat and coat.*] Like as not he 'd try to shelter himself there. [*He moves towards the outside door.*]

PRUDENCE. Where are you going?

PETER. To find him and fetch him back. We can't let him freeze.

[*They go together to the outside door and open it. It is morning outside.*]

PETER. It 's morning already.

PRUDENCE. Did you ever see such a dawn on the snow?

PETER. Never in my life. [*He kisses her and goes out.*]

PRUDENCE. [*Calling after him.*] I 'll have the coffee on the stove.

CURTAIN.

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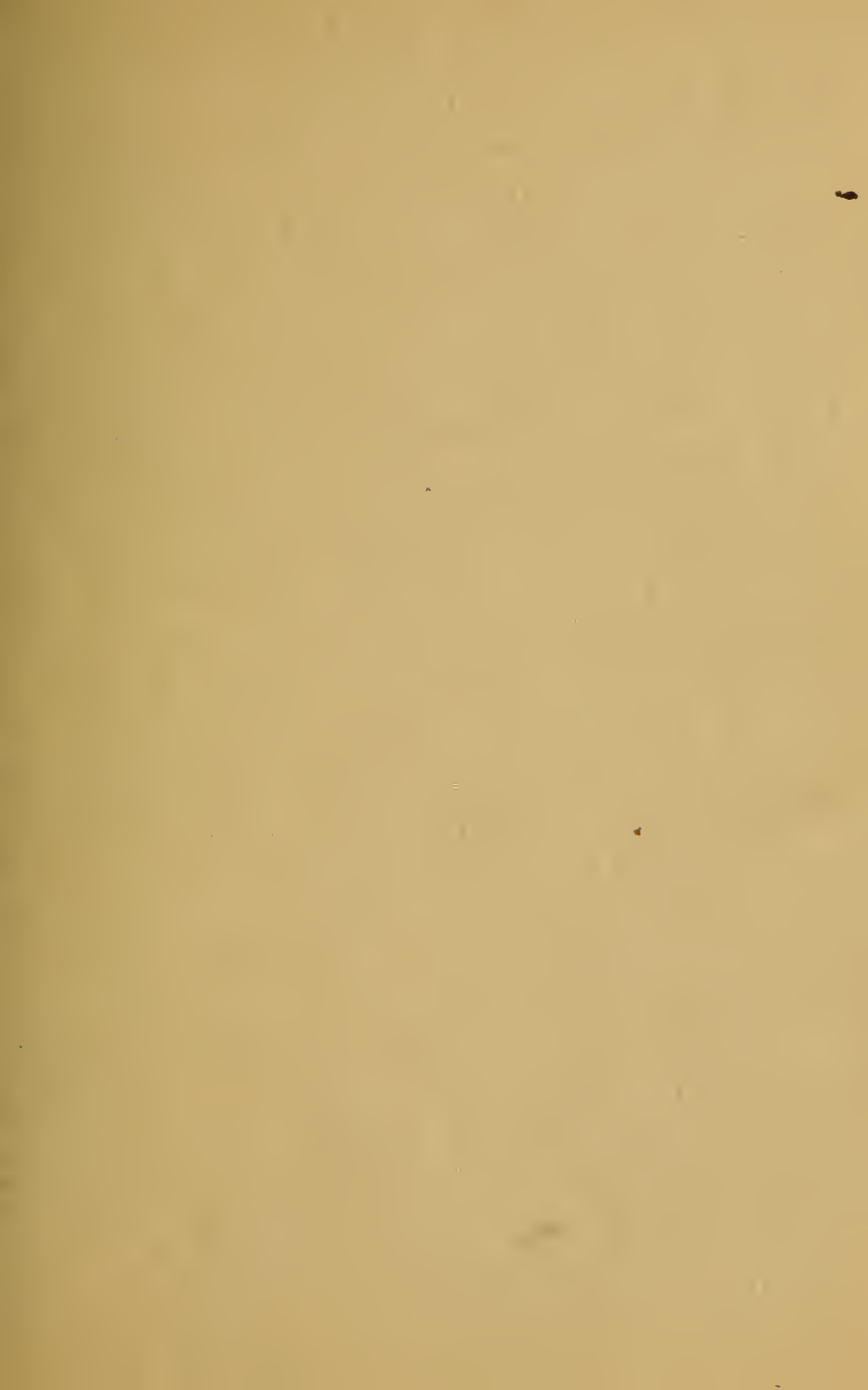
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